

The Zionist Project: Criticism, Yes; Delegitimization, No!
Rabbi David M. Frank, Temple Solel, Cardiff, CA Rosh Hashanah 5771

Last spring, my son, Jacob, sent me an email from school. The email contained some pictures he had taken along with his rather astonished description of what was called, "Israel Apartheid Week" at UC Davis. Just as on several other UC campuses, including our own local UCSD, students gathered for demonstrations around a mock "apartheid wall" they had set up on the quad. But these weeklong protests were mild compared to what took place at UC Berkeley. At Berkeley, the Student Senate escalated from mere protests to actually passing a resolution that the university divest its assets from all companies supporting the "Israeli occupation of Gaza." There was such an uproar that the senate president was, fortunately, sane enough to veto the bill – but, with the understanding that it will certainly be brought up again soon.

I wish it were true that our campuses were the only places from which we hear calls for divestment from Israel. But, there's an entire movement out there called, B.D.S. – which stands for, Boycott, Divest, and Sanction Israel. This year, at its General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church almost passed a disastrous resolution which labeled Israeli policy as Apartheid, called for Boycott, Divestment, and Sanction and, worst of all, for the end of Israel as a Jewish State. Had this resolution passed, it would have led to a complete break between our two faith communities. It took monumental intervention on the part of our American Jewish leaders to pull the Assembly back from this cliff. The result was less than we hoped for, but far better than it could have been. This will also be an ongoing effort.

So, what is happening? Has the world turned on Israel? When the veteran journalist, Helen Thomas, proclaims that the Jews should just leave Israel and go back to where they came from, are these the rants of an aging lunatic, or a unfiltered glimpse of what the rest of the world is really thinking but won't yet fully reveal?

And how are we to respond – we American Jews who are so deeply committed to social justice? Is it apartheid for Israel to be a Jewish State with 1.5 million Israeli Arab citizens in its midst? And what about Israel's military actions of late? Is Israel really becoming a colonial power that makes a sealed prison out of Gaza and a police state of the West Bank? How do we answer these accusations?

These are complex questions, which is why I want to talk with you about why I think Israel is so misunderstood today – both by us as American Jews, and by those who delegitimize Israel and question its right to exist as a Jewish State.

Let me begin with us, and with what may be our unrealistic, even idealized fantasies of Israel. The Israeli poet, Yehuda Amichai, once took us to task, as only a poet can do, for our failure to see the real Israel. This poem is called "Tourists:"

Visits of condolence are all we get from them.
 They squat at the Holocaust Memorial,
 They put on grave faces at the Wailing Wall
 And they laugh behind heavy curtains in their hotels.
 They have their pictures taken together with our famous dead
 At Rachel's Tomb and Herzl's Tomb
 And on Ammunition Hill.
 They weep over our sweet boys
 And lust after our tough girls
 And hang up their underwear
 To dry quickly
 In cool, blue bathrooms.

Once I sat on the steps by a gate at David's Tower, I placed my two heavy baskets at my side. A group of tourists was standing around their guide and I became their target marker. "You

see that man with the baskets? Just right of his head there's an arch from the Roman period. Just right of his head. ...I said to myself: redemption will come only if their guide tells them, "You see that arch from the Roman period? It's not important: but next to it, left and down a bit, there sits a man who's bought fruit and vegetables for his family."

So, what was Amichai saying to us? Clearly, that for too many American Jews, Israel is a romanticized tourist destination. We visit and see a "Jerusalem of Gold," a dream container for our history, our stony ruins and gleaming cities, our fantasies of an idealized Jewish people. We do not want Israel to be human. I mean human in the way that we are human, and hate and love, and make profound mistakes. We want Israel to be perfect, our golden face to the world.

Well, as it turns out, Israel is far from perfect. In fact, like its roughly hewn Jerusalem stone, Israel has major flaws and blemishes. It is religiously intolerant of liberal Judaism; it arrests women who try to pray at the Western Wall with a Torah; it has not done a great job of figuring out how to deal with its Israeli Arab minority, or with its huge West Bank and East Jerusalem settlement problem; and it usually has a fragile government, that can be brought down anytime war or peace breaks out.

And, for some reason, this makes us uneasy. I'm not sure why. It's not like we don't have rivalries and disagreements in this country about issues like borders and immigration, a Mosque at Ground Zero, same-sex marriage and abortion, our wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and of course the economy.

Part of our problem is that we want Israel to be better than even we ourselves know how to be. As the Jewish State, it is expected to be better than the rest. But, as we know, Israel lives in a tough neighborhood, which makes it even harder for it to be the Israel we'd like it to be.

Israel is at war every day – and not war on distant shores like the ones America fights.

Israel has come under a lot of criticism for the Second Lebanon War, Operation Cast Lead in Gaza, and the recent Flotilla Incident. But, Israel is facing a problem that we are only beginning to learn about in Iraq and Afghanistan, a war that lacks two key features of traditional warfare – uniforms and a battlefield. Today, the enemy is dressed in civilian clothing with bombs strapped to their bodies. Today, the enemy fires off mortars from a heavily populated neighborhood and then flees. Today, the enemy embeds armed combatants on a flotilla of peace activists and sails into Israeli territorial waters.

And all of this is magnified by the pace of modern battle technology, which is so rapid that it requires split second decisions in the field. No longer are life and death orders issued by generals in command centers, but by 19 year old soldiers in the heat of battle who have to react based solely on their training and momentary judgment.

So, yes, Israel makes military mistakes, for which those at fault are appropriately punished. And we need to accept the fact that Israel is not a perfect fighting machine. But these are not military policies – they are individual human mistakes of war made by those same young men who will one day be sitting beneath a Roman arch with bags of groceries for their families, who right now, just wish they could go to college or travel the world. But, still, Israel has statistically done better than even the United States in minimizing civilian casualties and has one of the most highly developed codes of military ethics of any country in the world.

As American Jews who are put in the position of answering Israel's critics, I think we can summarize the situation very easily by asking just one question. What would happen if tomorrow Israel unilaterally put down all its weapons? If Israel's 2005 withdrawal from Gaza is any indication, the answer is that the Jewish State would cease to exist. And what would happen if Hamas, Hizbollah, and their patron Iran declared peace? Only this - there would be peace.

But, all that being said, Israel knows it has gotten a lot wrong. There is heated disagreement over the settlements, East Jerusalem, and the peace process. And nowhere do you hear more vocal

criticism than in Israel's own press and universities. Israel is probably the most openly self-reflective and self-critical country in the world.

We American Jews need to develop a tougher skin when it comes to criticizing Israel. We shouldn't be afraid to say that Israel is less than perfect; any Israeli will tell you as much. Zionism is a young project.

But, there is also a line. And that line has been crossed by Helen Thomas and the B.D.S. Movement. It is the line that goes beyond criticism and crosses into the realm of delegitimization. When Helen Thomas declares that the Jews need to leave Israel and go back to Poland, Germany, or wherever they came from, she is reflecting a growing view that this world holds no place for a Jewish State. When Israel is repeatedly singled out by the United Nations or on college campuses for human rights violations, above all the brutally oppressive and militaristic regimes of the world, there has to be a deeper message.

I can't tell you for sure what that message is. The paranoid side of me says, this is endemic of a growing wave of global anti-Semitism, veiled in anti-Zionism. In my calmer moments, I think it is merely a complete antipathy toward the idea of a Jewish State. In either case, I'm worried.

A very important question is, what does it mean that Israel is a Jewish State?

Rabbi Donniel Hartman, of the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, says there are four essential characteristics of a Jewish State. First, the majority of its citizens should be Jewish. Second, it should express Jewish values both inwardly and outwardly. Third, it should be loyal, not just to the citizens of Israel, but to the whole Jewish people. And fourth, it should promote Jewish culture, Jewish identity, and Jewish ideas.

In other words, its DNA is fundamentally different from our own Jeffersonian democracy, in which our U.S. Declaration of Independence promotes "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," as a supreme American value. But "individual happiness" is not the supreme ideal of Israeli democracy. Israel is a nation-state, and it strives first and foremost to enlist its citizens in the cause of the Jewish People as a whole.

Perhaps the best way to understand Israel as a nation-state is through the story of the Israeli flag itself. Of course, we are all familiar with that blue and white flag – a Star of David framed by simple lines above and below. But, how did it come to be? It was actually first unfurled in 1897, when Israel was only a glint in the eye of Theodor Herzl, convener of the First Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland. David Wolffsohn was the flag's architect, and he once told how he conceived of the very flag Israel that flies today:

At the behest of our leader Herzl, I came to Basle to make preparations for the Zionist Congress. Among many other problems that occupied me then was one that contained something of the essence of the Jewish problem. What flag would we hang in the Congress Hall? Then an idea struck me. We have a flag — and it is blue and white. The Talit with which we wrap ourselves when we pray: that is our symbol. Let us take this Talit from its bag and unroll it before the eyes of Israel and the eyes of all nations. So I ordered a blue and white flag with the Shield of David painted upon it. That is how the national flag, that flew over Congress Hall, came into being.

So, the Israeli flag is really a Tallit – a symbol of our people's faith and endurance. Now, fast-forward a century. Today, there is a controversy. Perhaps the flag should be revised. Perhaps, symbols should be added to the flag, maybe a crescent, moon, and stars, to include the 1.5 million Israel Arab citizens who make up 20% of the Israeli population. Is it fair to exclude them from the national identity of the State of Israel?

As Americans, we might see nothing wrong with that. We celebrate diversity as part of our national identity – different cultures all living under one banner.

In fact, there is a large and growing international movement for Israel to adopt just this philosophy, and become a bi-national state – equally Arab and Jewish. Let everybody live together, as in America – no longer a Jewish State, but a land where all peoples can express their culture, faith, and values. This idea is gaining a lot of traction and, not surprisingly, is also becoming the next negotiating strategy of Israel's enemies. If they can't defeat Israel militarily, they'll just liquidate Israel's essential Jewish character.

And it is precisely here where we American Jews could misunderstand Israel. Because, unlike we Americans, who primarily experience Judaism as a religion, for Israelis, Judaism is a project of nation-building. For the first time in 2,000 years, the Jewish people are flourishing in their own. As Ambassador Michael Oren reminds us in his Rosh Hashanah greeting: "Last year Israel retained its record as home to the greatest number of scientific papers, technological patents, and noble prizes, per capita than any other nation."

And this is why Israel is important for us as American Jews, because it expresses Jewish peoplehood in a way we can't in America. Only Israel can fulfill our ancient Sinai aspirations to be a great nation.

We need Israel to complete us. And we can never give in to those who delegitimize the Zionist Project, who say there is no place in this world for a Jewish State. Those who call Israel an apartheid nation are either anti-Semitic, anti-Israel, or misinformed.

As American Jews, we have to explain to our college youth, and the Presbyterian leadership, and Helen Thomas that, while Israel is far from achieving our wishful ideal of Jerusalem of Gold, Zionism itself is a legitimate enterprise. When it comes to Israel's many faults, there is a bold line between criticism and delegitimization, and that line is being crossed by those whose real agenda is the elimination of the Jewish State.

This Rosh Hashana, our Torah reading tells the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac. Abraham is called to take his son, Isaac, atop Mount Moriah for a sacrifice. But, in the end, an angel calls out, Isaac is spared, and a ram is sacrificed in his stead. The servants go home; Isaac and Abraham leave that traumatic place. But, there is one character in the story who doesn't fare as well.

So, as I began with a poem by Yehuda Amichai, I leave you with this, a poem called the True Hero of the Akedah:

The true hero of the Akedah was the ram
Who did not know about the pact among the others...
I want to sing, for him, a memorial song,
About the curly wool and the mortal eyes
About the horns that stood silent on its living head.
After the slaughter, they were made into shofars...

I want to remember that final image –
Like a pretty photograph in a fancy fashion magazine.
The tanned, pampered youth (Isaac) in his finest of frocks
And by his side, the angel, dressed in a long silk gown . .

And behind them, as a colorful background, the ram
Entangled in the thicket before slaughter –
The thicket, his final friend.

The angel departed homewards
Isaac departed homewards

And Abraham and God had parted ways a while back.

But the true hero of the Akedah
Was the Ram.

As this New Year begins, and we sit in our fine frocks within our sanctuary to celebrate our good fortune as Jews in America, let us remember who the ram of our story is. At the end of this service, we will all go home, but Israelis will remain bound up in the very birthplace of our people. We may blow the shofar *here*, but *their* horns are caught up in the thicket of well-meaning resolutions debated by the Presbyterian Church and student senates across America. They are the ram that is poised to be sacrificed by the rising tide of anti-Zionism that Helen Thomas let slip out, like an anti-Semitic secret.

So, on this Rosh Hashanah, I urge us all to stand up for the ram. To teach our children, to educate our neighbors, and to raise our hands against the slaughtering knife of delegitimization of the Zionist Project. Let us give voice to the promise made at Mount Moriah: "in you shall all nations of the world be blessed."